

## Connection and peripheral encounters in *Paris bout du monde* and *Les Passagers du Roissy-Express*: text and photography by François Maspero and Anaïk Frantz

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### Abstract

This article deals with questions of transit and home, as well as with externality, internality and representation in photography and text by François Maspero and Anaïk Frantz, mainly concerning the Parisian suburbs. The focus is on their collaborative travel work, *Les Passagers du Roissy-Express* (1990), which stresses that the travellers' representation of experience, whether in text or in images, must remain incomplete and external to the lives they portray. The article also demonstrates the greater, yet problematic, sense of intimacy in *Paris bout du monde* (1992), a book of Frantz's photographs with a short text by Maspero. Like *Les Passagers*, *Paris bout du monde* focuses on marginalized Parisians, yet differs in its stress on living spaces photographed from within. As with the earlier text, the emphasis is on transitory spaces, and it too suggests the incomplete and reductive nature of photographic representation.

**Keywords:** Travel; home; representation; photography; suburbs; Paris

*Les Passagers du Roissy-Express* (1990) [*Roissy Express*], with text by François Maspero and photographs by Anaïk Frantz, is by now a seminal work in relation to issues of travel, migrancy and the representation of the Parisian suburbs.<sup>1</sup> It depicts their month-long north–south journey along the RER B commuter train line in the summer of 1989, exploring the area around each suburban station and finding new lodgings each day. The aim of this article is to analyse the text and photographs in relation to notions of travel, home, representation and subjectivity, and, perhaps most importantly, to explore the degree of success of the connection between the travellers and those they encounter. In exploring some of the sites of tension in the text, I look at questions of the dialogue, interaction and occasional friction between text and image, and between author and photographer.

I shall also – and firstly – be drawing on Maspero and Frantz's *Paris bout du monde* (1992) [*Paris, the Ends of the Earth*], a useful comparator that has not yet been the focus of critical study. This glossy album of photographs accompanied by a short text by Maspero again focuses on marginalized Parisians, although this time including those in the centre of Paris. Like *Les Passagers*, it deals with things normally unseen by the middle-class viewer or reader. However, in *Paris bout du monde* the images are mainly of people in their homes, and there is a far greater emphasis on the photographed subjects themselves, due to the excellent quality and large size of the pictures, and the

intimacy of the scenes of personal living space. While both works stress urban marginalization, *Paris bout du monde* focuses on the individual, in his or her precarious home, whereas *Les Passagers* emphasizes questions of social context and habitat.

Indeed, the 1992 album often has the effect of remedying what in *Les Passagers* can appear as an absence of proximity between the travellers and the people they portray. It should also be noted that the quality of the images in *Paris bout du monde* is far superior to that in *Les Passagers*, where the photographs are smaller and must compete with the surrounding text. This lack of prominence somewhat mutes the visual presence of those depicted in *Les Passagers*. However, we shall see that *Les Passagers* contains strategies to counteract this, presenting the people and environments portrayed as an unfinished presence that requires fleshing out by the reader/viewer.

Frantz's photographs in *Les Passagers* were taken quickly as part of a project, in order to record a journey and a series of environments, with the obligation of constantly moving on. As such the genesis of the images is very different to that in *Paris bout du monde*, where the images are of marginalized people personally known to her and taken over ten or more years. Maspero points out in *Les Passagers*, in relation to these earlier images, that 'c'étaient des photos qui prenaient leur temps' (Maspero and Frantz 1990: 23) ['Those photos took their time'].<sup>2</sup> This question of taking time to connect with others is crucial to the tensions in *Les Passagers*, where the photographer is often more willing than the writer to take the time to get to know the people they meet, and to enter into a relationship of exchange and discovery with them.

The depiction of home and one's location outside homes, or avoidance of entering them, is a key point of contrast between the works. It is significant that, of the sixty or so images in *Les Passagers*, only three are of people photographed from inside their homes, and that all these people are previously known to the travellers. Three others depict people at the windows of their homes (Maspero and Frantz 1990: 34, 173, 201). One of these is the first of the text, where Maspero is photographed outside, leaning by the window of his new Roissy acquaintance, with whom he is chatting. While on one level this image stresses willingness to engage in dialogue, the barrier of the window is a visual reminder that the travellers in *Les Passagers* are often at a very *physical* remove from the realities they seek to access, and suggests that other barriers may also exist.

This begs the question of the ability or willingness of the travellers in *Les Passagers* to enter into the living space of those they encounter. Rosello is right to single out the episode of 'le thé de Madame Zineb' ['Madame Zineb's cup of tea'] as crucial (Rosello 2001). Here, François refuses an invitation to take tea with a North African woman, although Anaïk would have liked to accept the offer.<sup>3</sup> This incident is paralleled later in the text when they do drink a cup of tea in someone's home, although that is 'un thé réconfortant' ['a comforting cup of tea'] with Karin, who is already known to them, in her familiar Parisian apartment (Maspero and Frantz 1990: 48–9, 166). This inversion of the missed tea ritual with Madame Zineb highlights François's occasional anxiousness at opening himself to the suburban unknown on an individual level. Before looking at the ways in which *Les Passagers* blends the desire for connection with evidence of its partial failure, let us turn to *Paris bout du monde*, with its greater stress

on intimacy and interiors, in order to gain a better sense of how it may differ from the visual and textual representations in the previous work.

### **I. *Paris bout du monde*: a connective yet unsettling intimacy**

The *Paris bout du monde* images, mostly taken by Frantz independently of the *Passagers* project, are sites of intimacy. They feature members of what Maspero terms 'la famille d'Anaïk' (Maspero and Frantz 1992: 10, 20) ['Anaïk's family'], photographed mainly from within their living spaces. These are marginalized people – gypsies, poor whites and Asian and black immigrants – pictured in their cramped and humbly furnished bedrooms, living rooms, shacks and, in the case of the tramps, in their various 'homes' in the metro or in the street. The social gap between those photographed and their predominantly middle-class viewers can be disturbing. It is difficult not to feel uncomfortable at 'entering' these people's bedrooms and sparsely furnished dwellings. An unsettling intimacy is created.

Some of the photographs suggest transit and precariousness particularly strongly. In a key image placed at the physical centre of the book, on page 45 out of 94, a woman of African origin, in modest attire and with a careworn look on her face, is shown standing in front of a large outdoor municipal map of Paris bearing the words 'PARIS PLAN TOURISTIQUE'. The irony of this image is clear, both for its own sake and as an echo back to the essentially middle-class 'touristic' project of *Les Passagers*. Tourism is largely a pursuit of the leisured classes, and this woman looks as though she is unlikely to engage in sightseeing in Paris. In fact, she is far more likely to be one of the many recent immigrants who have to travel long distances each day by RER or by metro, often changing several times, in order to reach their place of work or provision of social welfare. This ironic image, placed centrally in the work, is a moral nudge at the middle-class viewer who is indulging in a sort of prurient armchair tourism by viewing these photographs.

Of the people forced into travel and movement, whether to find employment, housing, or even refuge, many are lodged in very transitory spaces. *Paris bout du monde* contains a number of images of immigrant community groups in temporary lodgings, and some of the most hard-hitting images show people literally living in the street or in the metro. The gypsies whose portraits figure at the start of *Paris bout du monde* are officially obliged to move on from their halting zones after three months. And while many of those encountered lack the financial means to lead lives of physical movement – unlike the travellers in *Les Passagers* – their living spaces still resemble transit camps. In *Les Passagers*, Maspero is initially puzzled by the nickname of 'le Paquebot' ['the ocean-liner'] given to the gigantic 3,000-unit towerblock complex at 'les 3000 d'Aulnay', but then realizes its ironic allusion to lives stuck in 'de longs voyages immobiles [qui] restaient toujours en transit' (Maspero and Frantz 1990: 50) ['long motionless journeys stuck in transit']. In *Paris bout du monde*, the makeshift appearance of many of the living spaces stresses that they are transitory environments, while also highlighting that these are people's homes, housing their individual bits and pieces. This is made clear in details such as the dog basket made by a street lady out of a wooden crate or even, at its most minimal, the spoon held

over a can of ravioli by the homeless man dozing in the temporary refuge of a metro carriage (Maspero and Frantz 1992: 40, 49).

*Paris bout du monde* attaches great importance to the human face. Yet the faces there are not always easy to decipher, and are sometimes unsettling to view. The cover image is a case in point. It depicts a middle-aged woman, perhaps a gypsy, staring questioningly at the photographer – and, through her, at the viewer – with a powerful gaze and an enigmatic half-smile. She appears to be asking the photographer, and, by implication, the viewer, what purpose he or she has in viewing her image. Thus, right from the start of *Paris bout du monde*, the viewer is thrown off-balance, even before vicariously entering the living spaces of those photographed. This woman's questioning stare performs an inversion of the appropriating gaze often associated with those who photograph – or who view photographs. Susan Sontag has written that 'photographs turn people into objects that can be symbolically possessed' (Sontag 1979: 14). Yet, in this case, through the fore-grounding of the other's gaze, Frantz's honest and searching camera allows the locus of power and self-possession to lie squarely with the questioning woman.

As with the aforementioned woman's half-smile, there are several group images in *Paris bout du monde* where some members of a group smile in deference to the camera while others do not. Other faces and poses are uniformly sad or solemn. Those who refuse to smile seem to be drawing attention to their poverty and depressing circumstances. The presence of this sadness or solemnity, and of the ambiguity between smiles and seriousness within many of the images, adds depth and power to the work as a whole. And in all cases, the dignified stances of those photographed offset the voyeuristic position of the viewer. I now turn my attention more fully to *Les Passagers*, in order to explore how the text deals with questions of connection, externality and transit, extending some of the issues relating to the ethics of representation just discussed.

## II. *Les Passagers du Roissy-Express*: travelling frictions

One of the key differences between the works bears restating: *Paris bout du monde* is a collection of photographs for which Maspero later wrote a short text, while *Les Passagers* is much more of a collaborative venture, undertaken simultaneously by a photographer and a writer, whose approaches to their shared journey diverge on several key issues. I now focus on some of these points of conflict.

### 'Protective bubbles' and the desire for encounter

There is a tension in *Les Passagers* between the desire to enter into the reality passed through and the wish to remain inside one's own protective shell. In his recent autobiographical work, *Les Abeilles et la guêpe* (2002) [*The Bees and the Wasp*], Maspero discusses the act of travelling in terms of this tension, stressing the difficulty of entering other people's realities. He asserts a desire to feel he is *in* any environment travelled through, wishing that, 'le monde ne sera plus seulement un spectacle [...] puisque nous serons entrés, si peu soit-il, *dedans*' (Maspero 2002: 137–8) ['the world will no longer be mere spectacle since we will have entered *into it*, however partially']. The

addition of 'si peu soit-il' shows his awareness of the difficulty of entering other people's worlds. Earlier in the same text, he talks of the protective 'bulle' or 'bubble' that surrounds travellers. In suggesting, whether ironically or not, that, 'le sage reste dans sa bulle' (Maspero 2002: 123) ['the wise man stays in his bubble'], he invokes the feelings of insecurity that can beset those who venture into unknown territory. Later, he admits that he sometimes feels 'paralysé, sans parvenir à se projeter vers les autres, vers le monde inconnu qui est là, tout de suite, à la porte de la chambre d'hôtel' (Maspero 2002: 298–9) ['paralysed, unable to project oneself towards others, or towards the unknown world right outside the door of the hotel']. In *Les Passagers*, the nature of the project means that the travellers are required to interact with the local inhabitants and to share some of their wearisome commuting experiences. The emphasis on walking and taking public transport clearly demonstrates a wish to be fully immersed in the environment passed through. However, there is also a certain reluctance on François's part fully to engage on a human level with those he encounters: he is unwilling to take tea with Madame Zineb; he is afraid of the boys who come near them in an area in which he feels insecure, while Anaïk thinks they may just want their photograph taken; and, as we shall see, he often wishes to hurry on.

For Frantz, the point of journeying is to occasion human contact, and to return some day to the places and people visited. In her view, travelling should be engaged in 'pour se donner l'envie de revenir' (Maspero and Frantz 1990: 326) ['to make you want to come back']. She aims to create links with as many people as possible, taking this to the extreme of sending copies of the photographs, often indeed 'going back', making a special trip to 'return' the images in person, as though they belonged to the people photographed (as in fact they do in France since the mid-1990s, due to the laws relating to individuals' rights to their own image in the 'droit à l'image' legislation).<sup>4</sup> Her approach strengthens the connection between those behind and in front of the camera and breaks down the notion of the photographer capturing images of people in his or her private photographic 'box' (Maspero and Frantz 1992: 13).

Interaction in looking is key to Frantz's photographs. She desires to know her subject before 'shooting', and as such, asks permission before taking her photographs. However, the speed and the pressure to record during the journey in *Les Passagers* cause her to forget this etiquette once, to her great chagrin, with a group of Malian immigrants, where she is given a lesson in politeness by the angry men whose picture she has taken surreptitiously.<sup>5</sup> It is at this point that Anaïk's frustration with the pressure to record and the speed of the journey in *Les Passagers* starts to boil over: 'Moi qui aime prendre le temps de discuter d'abord, de faire connaissance, depuis le début de ce voyage, à photographier comme ça, à tout bout de champ, je me sens devenir un robot. C'est idiot: cette photo, prise de si loin, n'avait de toute façon aucun intérêt' (Maspero and Frantz 1990: 127–8) ['I like to take the time to chat and to get to know people, but ever since we started this trip, I feel like I'm becoming a robot, taking pictures all over the place. That was stupid, anyway – there was no point taking that photo from so far away']. Her ashamed reaction and her stress on the need to take the time to get to know people underline both her wish for proximity and her desire to slow down in order to create a relationship of equality with the photographed subject.

*Deceleration, time pressures and a problematic sort of flânerie*

*Les Passagers* is full of time pressures, as the project must be completed in one month.<sup>6</sup> Yet this pressure is self-imposed, no doubt partly for financial reasons, but perhaps also in order that the travellers will not become too involved in any one space, due to an awareness of the vastness of the project. Just after the Malian incident, in a moment of reflection on how the first week of their trip has gone, Anaïk's frustration with the time pressure is palpable: 'Jamais je n'ai pris des photos aussi vite [...] Les Africains du foyer ont raison: il faut prendre le temps de respecter les autres. Je ne veux pas finir comme les touristes dingues de la photo, trop pressés pour regarder ce qu'ils prennent' (Maspero and Frantz 1990: 134) ['I've never taken photos so quickly (...) The Africans from the hostel were right – you've got to take the time to respect others. I don't want to end up like those photo-crazed tourists who are in too big a rush to look at what they're photographing']. On the same page by contrast, Maspero stresses his feeling of being overwhelmed by the sheer number of lives encountered, each with their own complications – 'tout nous déboule dessus, la vie serrée, emmêlée, inextricable' (134) ['Everything's coming down on top of us, such dense, inextricable lives, mixed up with so many things']. For him, the best approach is to continue as they have been doing: 'Il faut continuer à passer. Juste passer. Sans se retourner' (134) ['We've got to pass on. Just pass on. Without turning back'].

Although this journey is on one level about slowing down, being accomplished in approximately thirty days when it could have been achieved, very differently, in a little over sixty minutes, Maspero and Frantz are in constant movement, always *passing by*, despite the numerous brief pauses in their journey. As such, the question of deceleration in *Les Passagers* is another site of tension, not only between the travellers but also within the text as a unit. We should remember that its title includes the words 'Roissy-Express'. The choice of the term 'Passagers' for the French title is particularly apt, especially as *passager* as an adjective in French means 'fleeting' or 'transient'.

If Maspero and Frantz are city observers *passing by*, this begs the question of whether they are perhaps also *flâneurs*. It is certainly true, that, like the *flâneur*, they seek to slow down and observe city life, focusing on things that would otherwise remain unseen. However, both Anne-Louise Milne (2006) and Max Silverman (1999) suggest that Frantz and Maspero do not engage in *flânerie*. Neither Milne nor Max Silverman focuses on the question of slowness; they stress other elements associated with the practice, seeing *flânerie* as a process of city observation that either aestheticizes the world or reduces it to spectacle. It is true that the *flâneur* is in some historical incarnations a cool observer, seeing the world as a show and sometimes tending to beautify it. Maspero and Frantz certainly do not aestheticize their surroundings through their words or images – indeed, one could even argue that the photographs are often deliberately unaesthetic. Neither are they detached observers. As such, our travellers do not fit into the rather negative idea of *flânerie* suggested by Milne and Silverman. Yet, on another level, they can indeed be seen as *flâneurs*, since they take the time to explore sites most people whizz past on their commuter train journeys. Their willingness to wander and their relative openness to chance encounter are also *flâneur*-like, since these elements have been important in *flânerie* at least since



Breton's *Nadja* (1928), and are encapsulated in the contemporary works of Jacques Réda.<sup>7</sup> On a micro level, however, their project does not engage fully with slowness, and as such their relationship to *flânerie* is problematic.

Because of the rapidity of the trip, the encounters remain on the level of fragments, even though there is a great breadth to what is recorded, as the text includes many snippets of stories and snatches of conversations. The photographic act is of its nature also fleeting, recording just one instant of time. Yet Frantz often manages to include or suggest a lot in each frame, and the interaction with the text adds a further layer of complexity. I now discuss how Frantz's photography adds depth and interest to the transient instant, and how it interacts with the text and sometimes extends it.

### *Representing the other: stepping in and out of the frame*

In *Les Passagers* there is a broad layering process at work, through the mixture of narrative observations, snatches of conversations, summaries of parts of life-stories, excerpts from guide books and historical and sociological documents, and transcriptions of signs and plaques drawn directly from physical reality. The polyphonic structure of the text deliberately allows as many voices as possible to filter through, along with the writings and objects that situate them sociologically and historically. This approach is indisputably an inclusive one. It can also be seen as a self-effacing strategy on the part of Maspero. Indeed, it is arguable that the decision to refer to the travellers in the third person as the 'ils' ['they'] tends to efface authorial presence, as though François and Anaïk were characters in a novel and not writing or structuring that text.<sup>8</sup> The fact remains that François, as the narrator and the person who writes up the notes, is ultimately the main structuring subjectivity for the written work. However, this remains implicit rather than stressed, as so many other voices crowd in.

On this question of subjectivity and objectivity, it is important to note the unexpected presence of Frantz in the photographs. It is the exception rather than the rule for photographers to include themselves in their images. Frantz seems, however, to wish to underline her role as a structuring subjectivity through her presence in three of the images, emphasizing that the photographer, like the writer, focuses our perceptions through what he or she chooses to depict.

Yet Frantz is only subtly present in these images. In fact she is never clearly identifiable, as her face is not visible in any of the photographs. In two of the images she is holding a camera, but in one she is recognizable only by her trenchcoat, as she sits with her back to the viewer in an empty RER carriage (Maspero and Frantz 1990: 105). Her presence in the final image of the text is strategic. The photograph shows her on the tracks at the southern end of the RER line, looking towards the viewer, her face obscured by her camera. As such, she is at once stressing her presence while remaining in the background, as she is literally in the back part of this image and is not clearly identifiable. This final image both emphasizes that the other people in her photographs are her real focus, while also clearly stressing her role in framing and portraying them.

Maspero, with his emphasis on other sources and incorporation of fragments of the external world (conversations, transcriptions, etc.), could, by contrast, be seen as

suggesting that things are more objective than they perhaps are. Yet he counters this with some gestures to fictionality, and there are also some nods to this in the photographs. Let us focus now on this question of fiction, and on how *Les Passagers* deals with the related issues of representing or accessing 'reality'.

### *The problem of 'la vraie vie'*

It is important to note that *Les Passagers* appeared in the collection 'Fiction et Cie' ['Fiction and All That'] in the original edition. *Les Abeilles et la guêpe* also appears in this collection in its original Seuil edition, despite the fact that, like *Les Passagers*, it gives the impression of being predominantly veridical, through its autobiographical/historical tone. In *Les Abeilles*, Maspero writes of 'la part d'irréel dans le réel qui s'inscrit dans toute évocation sincère de vie' (Maspero 2002: 328) ['the element of unreality in reality that permeates any sincere evocation of life']. This phrase can be fruitfully applied to *Les Passagers*, where Maspero seems aware that there is something unreal about his experience, although he is in search of what he calls 'la vraie vie' ['real life'] in these suburbs (Maspero and Frantz 1990: 25). While there is never any explicit comment on the inclusion of fictional markers in the text, it is interesting that the epigraphs chosen for the three main divisions are all drawn from fictional works relating to travel. The first and third of these are, respectively, from Alvaro Mutis's short work 'El Viaje', translated by Maspero as 'Le Voyage' (Mutis 1948), and from Georges Colomb's 1890s proto comic strip *La Famille Fenouillard* (1893).<sup>9</sup> The second epigraph, taken from Jacques Prévert's short play *Le Tableau des merveilles* (1935) is of most importance for our purposes. It concerns a country where towns are impossible to reach because their names are written on constantly pirouetting weathervanes.<sup>10</sup> This seems to be a clear nod to the travellers' growing realization of the impossibility of accessing other people's realities. In any case, their project is somewhat of 'un jeu' (Maspero and Frantz 1990: 20) ['a game'], in some senses a make-believe experience which will only last one month, and from which they can escape very easily. There is a fine line between a game and a pretence, which is why Ridon often speaks of 'fiction' ['fiction'] and 'jeu' ['game'] in the same breath (Ridon 2000: 29, 32), and which may explain some of the gestures to fictionality in the text.

Maspero never suggests, however, that Frantz's photographs evoke questions of distance from reality, fiction or even inadequate representation. At the start of *Les Passagers*, he stresses Frantz's avoidance of what he calls 'mise en scène', as regards the photographs that became the *Paris bout du monde* collection. In relation to her earlier photographs of actors and fashion models, undertaken as a breadwinning exercise, he claims she focused on the doubts and fears of those posing and was *unable* to convey the smooth persona that they wished to transmit. He calls this 'leur fiction' ['their fiction'], suggesting that he feels Frantz has a privileged access to the essence of people's realities (Maspero and Frantz 1990: 18–19).

Yet the question of the fictional pose is worth considering in connection with the images in both *Paris bout du monde* and *Les Passagers*, given the contrast between the predominantly posed photographs full of smiles and the general gloominess depicted or described. Harry Berger Jr has written in detail on the notion of the 'fictions of the



pose' in relation to early modern painted portraits, drawing on Barthes's emphasis on imposture in the photographic pose, the passing of oneself off as somebody or something else (Barthes 1980: 30; Berger 1994, 2000). Despite Maspero's suggestions to the contrary, Frantz does in fact participate in a sort of *mise en scène* or stage setting in both works, through which fictions of the pose are made evident. This is particularly forceful in *Paris bout du monde*, in the many images of people who do smile – for one instant, for the camera – in environments that speak clearly of miserable living conditions. In these photographs of interiors, Frantz takes care to show the cramped spaces, the trailing clothes and the sparseness of furniture along with the beaming smiles donned for the photographic moment.

In *Les Passagers*, most of the people photographed are posing and smiling outside their homes, which are generally bland towerblocks that, from a distance, display few signs of social misery on their surfaces. Closer up, however, the 'tags' and 'graphs' suggest an oppression by towering concrete and an attempt by some of the inhabitants to express themselves and to leave a distinctive human trace. The authorities constantly repaint these buildings, which to Maspero seems a deliberate whitewashing of internal problems. Frantz's images of 'tags' and 'graphs' point to the repressiveness of the surroundings, and are, in their own way, reminders of the simplification of the smiling pose. This is especially evident in those pictures where smiling youngsters pose in front of their own or others' handiwork. There is a fictional touch to the set-up of these images, which stress pride of achievement over the more complicated emotions inherent in this marking of desolate territory.

Frantz's images also use distance and externality to stress her lack of access to 'la vraie vie' in this travelling project. A number of the photographs in *Les Passagers* are shot from afar – like the stolen image of the Malians – underlining the difficulty of connection in such a rapid *passage* or passing-through. In several of the images, the distance renders the expressions on the faces unreadable. In other images, the subjects of the photographs have their backs turned to the photographer. Two striking examples are the poignant image of the lone woman in her Asian sari, and the image of the African with his suitcase on his head in the Parc du Sausset (Figure 1), both of which suggest stories of exile and transit that we will never know, and with which we cannot hope to connect (Maspero and Frantz 1990: 46, 191). These moments of exclusion of the viewer from the heart of the image reflect the travellers' own distance from events. This distance is a natural consequence of the speed of the encounters with the people and spaces involved and the lack of a fully developed rapport with the environment passed through.

### *Enriching depths*

Barthes wrote of the occasional 'platitude' or flatness of photography (Barthes 1980: 145). In *Les Passagers*, some of the images do appear flatter than others, reflecting feelings of emptiness or lack of interest experienced during the trip. These include the dingy interior of the RER station at Villepinte, the somewhat trivial picture of the signpost for the dog cemetery at Asnières and the image of the people waiting on the platforms at the Drancy RER station (Maspero and Frantz 1990: 66, 75, 170). Thus,



**Figure 1** 'Parc du Sausset', image reproduced from *Les Passagers du Roissy-Express* with the kind permission of François Maspero on behalf of Anaïk Frantz.

when the travellers report that 'nous n'avons rien vu' ['we didn't see anything'] at several instances in the text, these photographs reflect this sense of 'nothing happening'. However, information from the text can infuse even the duller scene with some meaning, as with the Drancy train platform photograph, which stresses the survival of everyday life and rituals near what was once a site of horror: the Nazi internment camp at Drancy during the Occupation.

For the most part, Frantz's photographs in *Les Passagers* possess considerable depths, despite the small size of the reproductions. Some achieve this by forcing the viewer to travel into the image. For example, 'Monsieur Pierrot' is placed in the middleground of his photograph but the composition of the image emphasizes depth through the line of the canal leading into the distance and through the inclusion of a large amount of space in front of the human figure. Both these techniques serve to emphasize his surroundings (Maspero and Frantz 1990: 133). Monsieur Pierrot lives in the particularly disadvantaged 'cité d'urgence' ('emergency high-rise housing') but nonetheless poses smiling and waving for the camera. Here, the composition of the photograph deliberately emphasizes the rubbish and dirt in his miserable environment, stressing the ambiguity of his jovial pose in the light of his material circumstances. In this image, Frantz is clearly playing on both physical and figurative depth through the framing and compositional process.

The question of photographic depth also arises with a key image in the text, the close-up of the high-rise flats at Drancy, Cité de la Muette (Maspero and Frantz 1990: 173) (Figure 2). Both because of Maspero's external status as passer-by and



**Figure 2** 'The Drancy Cité de la Muette', image reproduced from *Les Passagers du Roissy-Express* with the kind permission of François Maspero on behalf of Anaïk Frantz.

because of the architectural sterility of the surroundings, the built environment here seems to him to be two-dimensional, reduced to a set of horizontal and vertical lines.

The oppressive banality that for Maspero defines Drancy is particularly shocking to him given that this was the transit camp for 73,853 people, mostly Jews, deported from there to Auschwitz and other death camps. Here the photograph initially appears to be nothing more than a play on horizontal and vertical planes, yet a human presence gradually asserts itself in this bareness: two people looking out of an upstairs window, and a flowerpot on a balcony. The composition and content of the image underline the numbing predominance of inhuman, machine-made right angles in the high-rise environment. Yet the presence of the people and the trace of their daily experience – 'la vraie vie' – also gesture to Maspero and Frantz's physical exclusion from the interior life of these buildings, which from the outside appear unified and featureless but which in fact contain a host of individual lives.

Despite the reduction inherent in photography and in the project in general, which is by nature partial and selective, the images also 'open up' the text. They do this by enriching the text by developing or suggesting stories, and sometimes by providing the impetus for Maspero's narrative. The photograph of the old couple at 'les 4000', an enormous towerblock complex at La Courneuve, serves a memorial function, by reminding Maspero of forgotten events. While his initial impression is that his visit to La Courneuve has been bland and without incident, the photograph allows him to remember the old woman at her towerblock window, crying for the dreamed-of *pavillon* ['private house'] for which she has waited so long in vain. Here



**Figure 3** 'The McMort', image reproduced from *Les Passagers du Roissy-Express* with the kind permission of François Maspero on behalf of Anaïk Frantz.

the text enriches the photograph – and the photograph complements the text – in a striking example of Barthesian *relais* (Barthes 1982).

Several of the other photographs also add depth and detail to life-stories sketched in the text. Ridon has called the photographs 'des moments d'arrêt de la marche, où la surface acquiert de la profondeur' (Ridon 2000: 34) ['moments where the walkers pause and where the surface acquires depth']. Because we are told something about them, there is an increased presence to the young tag artists photographed in front of their impressive 'McMort' tag (Figure 3), to Monsieur Salomon sunning himself with his dog, to Madame Agnieska in her dignified silence and indeed to Monsieur Pierrot standing by the rubbish of the canal. In all of these cases, the story told infuses the photographs with complexity and vice versa.

#### *Autonomy, selectivity and positioning*

It should be remembered, however, that many of the other images in *Les Passagers* are accorded only the most cursory of contextualization, and that some are not explained at all. Given that *Les Passagers* is a text about journeying, and that *Paris bout du monde* portrays many spaces of transit, it seems appropriate to raise Barthes's notion of *ancrage* (an *anchoring* of the gaze through indicators from the text of what to look at in the image [Barthes 1982]). Yet the laconic captions underneath the photographs – usually banal indicators of place – and Maspero's omission of commentary on the

images mean that little *ancrage* actually occurs. For example, in the case of both the 'La Courneuve' photograph and that of Mme Agnieska, Maspero describes the encounter rather than the image, and as such does not tell viewers 'where to look' in the photographs, leaving the images their own power. In *Paris bout du monde*, Maspero states from the outset that he has deliberately omitted any captions from the images in order to give them more autonomy, adding, 'À vous de voir' (Maspero and Frantz 1990: 6) ['See for yourselves']. In *Les Passagers*, Maspero's reluctance to comment on the images may be due to a similar ethical desire to refrain from appropriation of the image through over-explanation. The absence of commentary also suggests that Maspero regards the photographs primarily as documents with their own reality and sometimes with a strong poetic force of their own.

Another effect of the lack of commentary is to stress the density of lives encountered and the impossibility of touching on them all, for example with the photographs of the black child with her sadly pensive look, the woman with her child in a deserted park, and the woman waiting by a graffiti-covered wall (Maspero and Frantz 1990: 50, 110, 162). There are also a considerable number of photographs taken by Frantz and described by Maspero that do not feature (for example, Maspero and Frantz 1990: 37, 43, 48, 113, 207). The photographs that are visually present but receive no textual attention, or textually present with no image – including that of Madame Zineb – evoke other lives beyond the text and the incomplete and sometimes selective nature of what has been included or achieved in this work. Importantly, *Les Passagers* declares its incomplete nature from the start of the text: Maspero stresses that: 'Ils n'avaient nullement l'intention de tout voir, de tout comprendre et de tout expliquer' (Maspero and Frantz 1990: 20) ['Their intention was in no way to see everything, to understand everything or to explain everything'].<sup>11</sup>

The *positioning* of the images in *Les Passagers* is another strategic aspect of the text-image relationship. It both echoes the journey experienced by Maspero and Frantz and allows the reader a sort of armchair participation in it. The 'sauts', 'retours' and 'rebonds' (Maspero and Frantz 1990: 64, 150) ['jumping', 'back-tracking' and 'rebounding'] that the travellers must undertake in order to reach their various destinations are mimicked by the mental and physical transit necessary in the reading and viewing process (image and text are often some distance apart, with the images sometimes preceding the corresponding text by several pages and vice versa). Likewise, the placing of an image of Sevrin Beaudottes in the middle of the account of Blanc Mesnil may be a deliberate emphasis on the monotony of these northern suburbs where the architectural landscape remains essentially the same, and where one place blurs into another, both literally and mentally, for Maspero and Frantz (1990: 64). In this manner, the physical location of the images in *Les Passagers* requires readers and viewers to engage in a type of mental journeying that mirrors that of the real travellers.

Yet, like the travellers, we must remain *outside* the experiences of the inhabitants of the environments in question. The title of *Paris bout du monde* suggests both a forsaken environment and one that is somehow exotic for the non-resident, while also stressing



the notion of the periphery, which is where external viewers must ultimately remain. This is also the case in *Les Passagers*, which is a series of textual and visual glimpses, a brief passage through the outskirts of the outskirts. Maspero asks frequent questions of himself and his readers about the worth of this trip, sometimes seeming to come down on the side of pessimism, with an emphasis on his position on the surface of people and things, and on the notion of the 'passage à vide' (Maspero and Frantz 1990: 62, 134, 165, 200) ['an empty passing-through' or 'a passage through emptiness']. Yet it is also clear that these living spaces are also what Maspero terms, in his heading for the penultimate chapter of *Les Abeilles et la guêpe*, 'des paysages humains', human landscapes hosting a plethora of subjectivities with varying points of view. While Maspero often complains of suburban emptiness he also points out that many of the residents enjoy, or are proud of, the feeling of *space* there. And despite the transitory and sometimes precarious air of the habitat, it contains people's homes, as is visually clear in *Paris bout du monde* and stressed by Maspero in *Les Passagers* (Maspero and Frantz 1990: 47, 59). Importantly, the aforementioned Drancy photograph of an apparently empty surface reveals, on closer inspection, the presence of inhabitants apparently scrutinizing *the onlooker*, from their own viewpoint and from their home. This inversion of the gaze, like that of the woman on the cover of *Paris bout du monde*, stresses the interaction of *equal* subjectivities.

Whereas *Paris bout du monde* places a greater emphasis on internality and on Frantz's connection with the people portrayed – while suggesting a certain voyeurism on the part of viewers – *Les Passagers* reflects on some of the factors that make connection and access to interiors difficult in the travellers' project. These include self-imposed time pressures, the fact that the people encountered are strangers and the differences in approach between Maspero and Frantz. Despite these differences, and while encounters with specific individuals are sketchier than in *Paris bout du monde*, the desire to connect with an environment and to reflect a sense of it is clear. As Silverman puts it, Maspero's mouthpiece François is 'an anxious and self-conscious outsider, attempting to make connections: one who neither reduces "the other" to the same, nor exoticizes the other's difference, but who *gropes towards* a different understanding of and relationship with the stranger' (Silverman 1999: 92; my emphasis). *Les Passagers* records the difficulties of interacting with the suburban unknown – as well as the travellers' sometimes different approaches – while also expressing the wealth of lived experience in that environment, taking care to give a place within its pages to as many people as possible and creating moments of poignant depth in its photographs. As such, it can be called an honest and richly human text.

### Notes

1. Henceforth abbreviated as *Les Passagers*.
2. This and subsequent translations from *Les Passagers* are a mixture of my own renderings and those of Paul Jones, in his English-language version of the text (Maspero and Franz 1994).
3. First names are used throughout the text, as though François and Anaïk were characters in a novel, a point discussed in the section 'Representing the other'.



4. See Trouille (2008). See also Anon (2008) for the 'droit du net' link, which details how these rights pertain generally and to the Internet in particular.
5. This key issue has been previously discussed by Ridon (2000) and Forsdick (2005a).
6. On time pressures, see Maspero and Frantz (1990: 128, 134, 164).
7. On Réda's *flânerie* and wanderings in *Les Ruines de Paris* (1977) and *Le Méridien de Paris* (1997), see Cooke (2007).
8. For a slightly different perspective on the third-person narration, see Milne (2006: 496–7) and Jones (2004: 129).
9. Other fictional markers include the novelistic use of 'ils' and what Sheringham describes as 'the humorous pastiche of picaresque travel fiction in the form of chapter digests in bold italics that summarize the day's adventures' (Sheringham 2006: 317).
10. 'Dans ce pays le nom des villes et des villages est inscrit sur les girouettes, au lieu d'être inscrit sur les bornes... On suit la flèche, mais le vent tourne et on est perdu à nouveau. C'est comme si les villes se sauvaient. Impossible de mettre la main dessus' (cited in Maspero and Frantz 1990: 137) ['In this country the names of the towns and villages are written on the weathervanes instead of on the boundary stones... You follow the arrow but then the wind changes and you're lost again. It's as if the towns are running away. Impossible to pin them down'].
11. Forsdick (2005b) sees the self-conscious foregrounding of the notion of the project in *Les Passagers* as a frank emphasis on the necessarily selective nature of such a journey, where encounters are constrained by time and the need to move from place to place, and by the subjective choices in what the travellers portray.

Dauge-Roth (1997) also discusses partiality in relation to this text. See also Philippe Antoine's recent discussion of two 'photobiographical' travel texts contemporary to *Les Passagers* – those of Jean-Loup Trassard (1989) and Olivier Rolin (1987) in Russia – in which, according to Antoine, the travellers do not claim to have a complete view of the environment passed through (Antoine 2004).

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